COMM 690E
Special Topics: Ethnography of the Digital
Fall 2023

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Department of Communication

Meetings: Thursdays 4-6:45 pm at ILC S416
Office Hours: Tues/Thurs: 1-2 pm or by appointment
Contact Information:
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Credits: 3

Course description
Ethnography of the Digital is a practice-intensive seminar to rethink ethnographic methods as our social lives are increasingly mediated by digital technologies. What does fieldwork entail when we center digitality in our research? How should ethnographers negotiate access, trust, and proximity as they vacillate between the online and the offline? How should we retool ethnographic tools and techniques (e.g., fieldnotes, participant observation, interviewing, and multimodal ethnography) as we navigate the materiality and politics of digital media? We will explore these questions while paying attention to how digital technologies complicate puzzles arising due to gender, race, class and other power relations in the field. Readings draw on an interdisciplinary corpus from communication and media studies, sociology, anthropology, and information science. Students will craft and conduct a digital ethnographic project related to their areas of interest. This seminar is ideal for students planning to conduct independent fieldwork for their Ph.D. research, but those interested in the epistemological and political consequences of studying digital media ethnographically are also welcome.

Course objectives
By the end of this course, you should be able to:
- explain the aims, possibilities and limitations of ethnographic methods to study digital media and technologies
- begin to develop answers to conceptual questions on how digital media and technologies (re)shape conducting ethnographic research
- gain hands-on experience collecting, analyzing, and writing up (digital) data using ethnographic techniques

WHAT WILL HELP YOU TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THIS COURSE?

Accommodation Statement

The University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing an equal educational opportunity for all students. If you have a documented physical, psychological, or learning disability on file with Disability Services (DS), you may be eligible for reasonable academic accommodations to help you succeed in this course. If you have a documented disability that requires an accommodation, please notify me within the first two weeks of the semester so that we may make appropriate arrangements. For further information, please visit Disability Services (https://www.umass.edu/disability/)

Names & Pronouns
Everyone has the right to be addressed by the name and pronouns that they use for themselves. You can indicate your preferred/chosen first name and pronouns on SPIRE, which appear on class rosters. I am committed to ensuring that I address you with your chosen name and pronouns. Please let me know what name and pronouns I should use for you if they are not on the roster. Please remember: A student's chosen name and pronouns are to be respected at all times in the classroom.

Academic Honesty Statement
Since the integrity of the academic enterprise of any institution of higher education requires honesty in scholarship and research, academic honesty is required of all students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Academic dishonesty is prohibited in all programs of the University. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to: cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, and facilitating dishonesty. Appropriate sanctions may be imposed on any student who has committed an act of academic dishonesty. Instructors should take reasonable steps to address academic misconduct. Any person who has reason to believe that a student has committed academic dishonesty should bring such information to the attention of the appropriate course instructor as soon as possible. Instances of academic dishonesty not related to a specific course should be brought to the attention of the appropriate department Head or Chair. Since students are expected to be familiar with this policy and the commonly accepted standards of academic integrity, ignorance of such standards is not normally sufficient evidence of lack of intent (http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/codeofconduct/acadhonesty/).

If you have any questions about what may constitute plagiarism, please consult with me and/or our Writing Center: Writing, Plagiarism, & Academic Honesty at UMass Amherst Writing Center. Purdue Owls Online Writing Lab also provides a comprehensive guide related to plagiarism.

Title IX

In accordance with Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 that prohibits gender-based discrimination in educational settings that receive federal funds, the University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to providing a safe learning environment for all students, free from all forms of discrimination, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and retaliation. This includes interactions in person or online through digital platforms and social media. Title IX also protects against discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, or related conditions, including recovery. There are resources here on campus to support you. A summary of the available Title IX resources (confidential and non-confidential) can be found at the following link: https://www.umass.edu/titleix/resources. You do not need to make a formal report to access them. If you need immediate support, you are not alone. Free and confidential support is available 24 hours a day / 7 days a week / 365 days a year at the SASA Hotline 413-545-0800.

Attendance & Participation

The success of the class depends on your regular attendance and reliable participation. Attendance and participation mean showing up on time to scheduled class meetings; completing the readings and weekly posts in advance of each class session; contributing to in-class discussions, and being prepared to engage constructively and respectfully with one another.

I strive to create an inclusive, accommodating classroom – one that's responsive to students dealing with tech or connectivity issues; students with specific access needs, etc. – that should enable (and, I hope, incentivize!) all of you to attend and engage. If additional obstacles or personal challenges arise for you over the course of the semester, please feel free to bring them to my attention; we can work together to discuss alternative means of engagement.

ASSIGNMENTS & ASSESSMENTS

Attendance & participation (10%)
Your preparation and participation will play crucial roles in the success of this seminar. You are expected to come to class with the required readings in hand, having read the texts for the week and ready to discuss them. Participation will be evaluated on the basis of your presence in, preparation for, and contribution to class discussions.

Weekly Memos (%30)
Weekly memos should be 1-2 paragraphs and focus on two things: 1) discussion of an argument or aspect of the readings that you found particularly interesting, and 2)

questions you would like to discuss in class. Please post them on our Google Folder on Wednesdays by 5 pm.

Field Assignments* (40%):
a) *Project proposal* (due September 18th): A one page description of the research project, including a research question(s), field site(s), and a statement of what you expect to find.
b) *IRB proposal* (due September 25th): Follow the UMass Amherst process for research involving human subjects.
c) *Fieldnotes:* Submitted weekly starting on October 5th. Fieldnotes should be typed (even if initially written by hand during observation), and should distinguish between observation, reflexivity, and interpretation and analysis (both theoretical and methodological)
d) *Interview transcripts*: During your fieldwork, conduct at least one informal interview and submit handwritten notes that were kept during the interview and a rough transcript recreated after the interview from your notes and memory. Conduct at least one formal (recorded) interview and submit a verbatim transcript for at least fifteen minutes of interview time. Observational, interpretive/analytic, and self-reflexive fieldnotes should supplement the transcripts.

*Thanks to Timothy Pachirat for the idea and outline of this assignment.

Final Paper (20%)

15-20 pages, double spaced paper in which you will discuss the process and initial results of your fieldwork in light of the ethnographic approaches we examine throughout the semester.

Grading Scale

Grade	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	F
Points	94- 100	90-93.5	87- 89.5	84- 86.5	80-83.5	76- 79.5	70- 69.5	≤ 66.5

Submitting Assignments
Unless otherwise instructed, please submit all assignments via Canvas. Please include your name and the paper title in the file name.

The Syllabus is a Living Document
This syllabus is a starting point for the course. It is subject to change as the term unfolds, in response to your feedback and my assessment of how things are going. I'll be seeking out your feedback regularly. Some adjustments are likely. These adjustments may involve altering assignments or adding, removing, or modifying readings. Any changes will be discussed in class and announced via email, so attend class and check your inbox.

Class Schedule:

9/7   **Week 1: Introduction**

Small, M.L. Ethnography Upgraded. *Qualitative Sociology* 45, 477–482 (2022).

9/14   **Week 2: What's Ethnography?**

Geertz, Clifford. 1972. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." Daedalus 101(1): 1-37.

Fine, Gary Alan. 1993. "Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research." Journal of Contemporary Ethnography. 22(3): 267-294.

Duneier, Mitchell. 2011. How Not to Lie with Ethnography. *Sociological Methodology*, *41*, 1–11.

de Seta, Gabriele. 2020. Three lies of digital ethnography. *Journal of Digital Social Research*, *2*(1), 77-97.

Recommended:

Video: Lies of Digital Ethnography (Rutgers Digital Ethnography Working Group) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_ucUpRgrvI

Doing Digital Ethnography: Private Messages from the Field (Special issue in the *Journal of Digital Social Research*) https://jdsr.se/ojs/index.php/jdsr/issue/view/3

9/21   **Week 3: Defining the Field and the Object of Study**

Gupta, Akhil, and James Ferguson. 1997. "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method, and Location in Anthropology." In Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science. University of California Press. Pp. 1-46.

Lyman, Peter and Wakeford, Nina. 1999. "Introduction: Going into the (Virtual) Field." *American Behavioral Scientist,* 43(3), 359–376.

Bonilla, Yarimar, and Jonathan Rosa. 2015. "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States." *American Ethnologist* 42 (1): 4-17.

Coleman, Gabriella. 2010. "Ethnographic Approaches to Digital Media." *Annual Review of Anthropology*. 39: 1-16.

Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor. 2012. "Participant Observation in Virtual Worlds." In *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press. Pp. 65-91.

9/28   **Week 4: Tools and Techniques for Digital Immersion I**

Burrell, Jenna. 2009. "The Field Site as a Network: A Strategy for Locating Ethnographic Research." Field Methods 21(2): 181-199.

Geiger, R. Stuart, David Ribes. 2011. "Trace Ethnography: Following Coordination Through Documentary Practices." HICSS '11 Proceedings of the 2011 44th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, 1-10.

boyd, danah. 2015. "Making sense of Teen Life: Strategies for Capturing Ethnographic Data in a Network Era." in Hargittai, Eszter and Sandvig, Christian. *Digital Research Confidential: The Secrets of Studying Behavior Online*. The MIT Press.

Hine, Christine. 2015. "Observing and Experiencing Online/Offline Connections." In: *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, Embodied, and Everyday*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 89-124.

Lane, Jeffrey. 2016. "The Digital Street: An Ethnographic Study of Networked Street Life in Harlem." American Behavioral Scientist 60(1): 43-58.

Reyes, Victoria. 2020. Ethnographic toolkit: Strategic positionality and researchers' visible and invisible tools in field research. *Ethnography*, *21*(2), 220–240.

Recommended

Video: Doing Digital Ethnography: A Panel with Sophie Bishop, André Brock, Jeff Lane and Nick Seaver (The Ethnographic Café and the Rutgers Digital Ethnography Working Group) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hb9fZBGbBJc

10/05 **Week 5: Tools and Techniques for Digital Immersion II**

Light, Ben, Jean Burgess, and Stephanie Duguay. 2016. "The Walkthrough Method: An Approach to the Study of Apps." *New Media & Society* 20(3): 881-900.

Burns, Ryan and Wark, Grace. 2019. "Where's the database in digital ethnography? Exploring database ethnography for open data research." *Qualitative Research* 20(5): 598-616.

Christin, Angèle. 2020. "The Ethnographer and the Algorithm: Beyond the Black Box." Theory & Society. 49:897–918.

Kraemer, Jordan. 2021. "Situated Immersion: Reimagining Remote Methods." *Points,* Data & Society Research Institute. https://points.datasociety.net/situated-immersion-8a7bdb47d506

Rosa, Fernanda R. 2022. "Code Ethnography and the Materiality of Power in Internet Governance." *Qualitative Sociology* 45: 433–455.

Guest speaker: Fernanda R. Rosa (Virginia Tech)

10/12 **Week 6: Digital Relations and Sociality**

Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of Age in Second Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, pp. 1-86.

Stuart, Forrest. 2020. *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online Infamy.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 76-101; 209-218.

Glatt, Zoë. 2023. The intimacy triple bind: Structural inequalities and relational labour in the influencer industry. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*

Glatt, Zoë. 2023. "Embracing the "messy web" of intersectional feminist digital ethnography" In: *The Platformized Creative Worker: An ethnographic study of precarity and inequality in the London influencer industry (2017-2022)*. The London School of Economics and Political Science, London.

Baym, Nancy. K. 2018. *Playing to the crowd: Musicians, audiences, and the intimate work of connection*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 1-31.

Guest speaker: Zoë Glatt (Microsoft Research)

Recommended

Nakamura, Lisa. 2002. *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity and Identity on the Internet*. London, England: Routledge.

10/19 **Week 7: Digital Organizations/Machines**

Orr, Julian. 1996. *Talking about Machines: An Ethnography of a Modern Job*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 1-61.

Brayne, Sarah. 2021. *Predict and Surveil: Data, Discretion and the Future of Policing*. Oxford University Press, pp. 1-16; 74-99.

Vertesi, Janet. 2012. "Seeing Like a Rover: Visualization, Embodiment, and Interaction on the Mars Exploration Rover Mission." *Social Studies of Science* 42(3): 393-414.

Evans, J.M. 2022. Exploring Social Media Contexts for Cultivating Connected Learning with Black Youth in Urban Communities: The Case of Dreamer Studio. *Qual Sociol* 45, 393–411.

Shestakofsky, Benjamin. Forthcoming. "All in the Family?" and "Methodological Appendix" In: *Behind the Startup: How Venture Capital Shapes Work, Innovation, and Inequality*. University of California Press.

Guest speaker: Benjamin Shestakofsky (University of Pennsylvania)

Recommended

Latour, Bruno, and Steve Woolgar. 1986. Chapter 2 in *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

10/26 **Week 8: Digital Bodies/Self**

Gershon, Ilana. 2014. "Selling Your Self in the United States." *Political & Legal Anthropology Review* 37 (2): 281–95.

Schüll, Natasha. 2018. "Self in the Loop: Bits, Patterns, and Pathways in the Quantified Self." *The Networked Self, Volume 5: Human Augmentics, Artificial Intelligence, Sentience*, edited by Zizi Papacharisi. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Wang, Shuaishuai. 2019. Live streaming, intimate situations, and the circulation of same-sex affect: Monetizing affective encounters on Blued. *Sexualities*, 1–17.

Zhang, Lin. 2023. *The Labor of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the New Chinese Digital Economy*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1-62.

Guest speaker: Lin Zhang (University of New Hampshire)

Recommended

Balsamo, A. (1999). Technologies of the gendered body: reading cyborg women. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

Stensrud, Astrid B. 2017. "Precarious Entrepreneurship: Mobile Phones, Work and Kinship in Neoliberal Peru." *Social Anthropology* 25 (2): 159–73.

11/02   **Week 9: Digital Infrastructures/Platforms**

Chirumamilla, Padma. 2019. Remaking the set: innovation and obsolescence in television's digital future. *Media, Culture & Society*, *41*(4), 433–448.

Petre, Caitlin. 2021. *All the news that's fit to click*. Princeton University Press, pp. 47-67; 199-206.

Ross Arguedas, Amy. A. 2022. Diagnosis as Subculture: Subversions of Health and Medical Knowledges in the Orthorexia Recovery Community on Instagram. *Qual Sociol* 45, 327–351.

Johnson, Alix. 2021. "The Mechanics of Sovereignty: Autonomy and Interdependence across Three Cables to Iceland," *American Anthropologist* 123(3): 578-589

Fletcher, Akil. 2022. "Black Gamers' Refuge: Finding Community within the Magic Circle of Whiteness." *Routledge Companion to Media Anthropology*.

Fletcher, Akil. 2020. "Esports and the Color Line: Labor, Skill and the Exclusion of Black Players." *Proceedings of the 53rd Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.*

Guest speaker: Akil F. Fletcher (Princeton University)

Recommended

Leigh Star, Susan. 1999. "The Ethnography of Infrastructure." American Behavioral Scientist 43(3): 377-391.

11/09   **Week 10: Algorithms as Culture and Method**

Singh, Ranjit. 2019. "Give Me a Database and I Will Raise the Nation-State." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*. 42(3): 501-518.

Beltrán, Hector. 2020. Code Work: Thinking with the System in México. *American Anthropologist,* 122: 487-500.

Cellard, Loup. 2022. Algorithms as figures: Towards a post-digital ethnography of algorithmic contexts. *New Media & Society*, *24*(4): 982–1000.

Seaver, Nick., 2022. *Computing taste: algorithms and the makers of music recommendation*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 1-21; 140-158

Bishop, Sophie., & Kant, Tanya. 2023. Algorithmic autobiographies and fictions: A digital method. *The Sociological Review*.

<u>Recommended</u>
Seaver, N. (2017). Algorithms as culture: Some tactics for the ethnography of algorithmic systems. *Big Data & Society*, *4*(2).

11/16 **Week 11: No Class**

** Ideally, you should have left your field site and started drafting your final paper by November 13th so please use this time to work on your papers.

11/30   **Week 12: Multimodal Ethnography: Image, video, sound, text**

Favero, Paolo. 2017. "Curating and Exhibiting Ethnographic Data." In: Hjorth, Larissa, Heather Horst, Anne Galloway, and Genevieve Bell (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*. Taylor & Francis, pp. 275-287.

Galman, Sally Campbell. 2019. "Not a mirror, but an icon: Ethnographic comic art in three acts." *American Anthropologist*.
https://www.americananthropologist.org/ethnographic-storytelling/galman-not-a-mirror

Dattatreyan, E. Gabriel, and Isaac Marrero-Guillamón. 2019. "Introduction: Multimodal anthropology and the politics of invention." *American Anthropologist* 121(1): 220-228.

Docot, Dada. 2021. "Multimodal extractivism." *American Anthropologist* 123(3): 689-693.

Rosa-Salas, Marcel. 2021. "A Sense of Momentary Presence: Using Instagram to Document Consumer Culture's Ambivalences." *American Anthropologist* 123(3): 693-698.

Durrani, Mariam. 2021. "Digital Infrastructures of the Internet Outrage Machine: An Autoethnography of Targeted Faculty Harassment." *American Anthropologist* 123(3): 698-702.

Günel, Gökçe, Varma, Saiba and Watanabe, Chika. 2020. "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography." Fieldsights: Society for Cultural Anthropology.
https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography

** Review these two lists curated by Shannon Mattern on fieldwork toolkits and experimental design ethnography collaboratives

Guest speaker: Hanna Dosenko (University of California, Irvine)

12/07   **Week 13: Bringing it all together.**